3: Richards E-5 (1930-1934)1956
FQ5 Bemba FQ5

The Interpretation of the Ceremony

881 puberty ceremonies in Central Africa contain such phrases as 'the girls are then given *instruction* in sex and motherhood'. It is therefore important to ask ourselves at the outset the sense in which the Bemba are here using the word 'teach'.

I must admit that their emphasis on this function of the chisungu and their use of the word *ukufunda*, which they now commonly employ for European school teaching, at first misled me. Even after fairly wide comparative reading on the subject I began to imagine that the candidates had at least some direct instruction on some subject or other at some time during the ceremony. I confess to a mental picture of the girls sitting in the initiation hut and listening to talks from an old woman on what might be called in modern idiom 'marriage guidance'.

I doubt whether any such direct instruction took place during the chisungu I witnessed, or indeed in any other such rite. The time free for such teaching was very small. Added to this the girls were usually shoved away in the corner of the initiation hut and sometimes given direct orders not to look at what was going on. Their heads were, more often than not, closely wrapped under thick blankets. I never heard any part of the ceremony explained. If any useful information was handed out during the chisungu one would be inclined to think that the candidates themselves would be the last people to have a chance of acquiring it. The women said they were teaching them 'the things of womanhood' and also 'things of the gardens'. In other words, how to bear and bring up children, to cook, act as housewife, and garden, and we saw that rites representing hoeing, sowing, cooking, gathering fire-wood and the distributing of food occurred throughout the ceremony.
881 But instruction, in the European sense, was quite unnecessary in
868 such subjects. Bemba girls play at cooking as soon as they can stand, and they help their mothers in the house most of the day. They go with the older women to garden and also learn from them how to look for mushrooms and wild spinaches. Moreover, the more complex aspects of housekeeping such as the care of the granary and the reaping of the grain are not entrusted to the girl until some years after marriage. That is to say the chisungu rite
881 neither gives additional knowledge or skill nor the right to use it.
● 864 In the same way, Bemba girls are not ignorant of the nature of sex

3: Richards E-5 (1930-1934)1956
FQ5 Bemba FQ5

since many of them have been given to their husbands before puberty and some form of intercourse, usually incomplete, has taken place. They have also acted as nurses of their young brothers and sisters to an extent that is rare in most sections of our society, and they are therefore familiar with the elements of the rather simple system of child care practised in this tribe.

What then do the Bemba girls learn in their chisungu or in what sense can they be said to learn?

First of all they learn a secret language or rather, secret terms. The different *mbusa* have names supposedly, at any rate, known only to initiated women. For instance I was taken some way into the bush to be told with every precaution to ensure secrecy that 'we wômen' call whitewash *lota*, an archaic term, instead of *pemba*, the more common word. Girls also learn the chisungu songs. The doggerel rhymes associated with the *mbusa* (see Appendix B) are some of them widely sung, but they have a number of secret or semi-secret meanings apart from the overt one. What seems to the educationist to be the most mumbo-jumbo and useless aspect of the whole affair may actually constitute one of the most prized items of information to the people concerned.

Girls are also said to learn the secret language of marriage. The Bemba language abounds in phraseology with hidden or allusive meaning. It is part and parcel of court etiquette and it is used in other special social relationships and in particular between husband and wife. 'We married people' said a male informant 'know how to say things that a young boy and girl would not understand. That is what we want a girl to learn at her chisungu'. The intimacy that surrounds the physical relation of husband and wife, described as 'the secret things within the house' seems to the European to be curious in view of the lack of other forms of intimate companionship between them, but it is evident that it is the special phraseology and the taboos of married life that a man hopes his wife will learn in the chisungu. The candidates also have to learn the rather complex sequence of the rites themselves which represents a considerable effort of memory in communities without a written language.

Nor does it matter if the girl herself does not see the whole of the ceremony which is performed over her. It is a form of education